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FICTION

How war keeps raging long after battles are over

Lost City Radio By Daniel Alarcón. HarperCollins, 257 pp., \$24.95.

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In a South American country scarred by years of battle, the most popular show on the airwaves is Lost City Radio. Each Sunday night, Norma, a sometime journalist with a voice like honey, reads the names of the disappeared, people who vanished into the acrid smoke of a bloody, protracted war.

Listening to Norma has become a national religion, solace to the families of the presumed dead. "It was what they did instead of church."

The insurgency is a memory, crushed by government tanks 10 years before. Checkpoints and censors keep the population docile and uninformed. Pollution has turned the sky into "a dirty cotton ceiling." And Norma's husband, Rey, is missing.

He trekked into the jungle looking for medicinal plants during the final days of the war and never returned. Authorities claim Rey was a rebel, a terrorist with a secret identity. Norma wants to believe he was a botany professor with dimples and a crooked nose who loved her above all others.

She lives in a state of tortured limbo - not widow, not wife - until 11-year-old Victor, orphaned and alone, appears at her station. He has emerged from the same thicket that swallowed Rey; in his pocket he carries a clue that could help her find her husband.

Daniel Alarcón writes with a poet's heart and a reporter's skill. He began researching the book in 1999, interviewing those who'd survived the violence that tore through his native Peru, and studying other conflicts around the globe. His journalism paid off. "Lost City Radio" is filled with startling images that are impossible to shake: A boy from the rain forest longs to see the ocean, not to play in the surf, but to search for his mother's battered body. Government soldiers bury prisoners to their necks, then urinate on their faces. Rebels lop off a man's hands while his children watch.

But all is not carnage and cruelty. Alarcón understands the yin/yang of warfare and its aftermath, and describes with beautiful, succinct prose how opposing sensibilities - loyalty and treachery, tenderness and brutality - can co-exist in the same body, the same place, like dandelions poking through chunks of broken asphalt.

On his way to see Norma, Victor meets an old man on a bus, a stack of X-rays in his lap. A child of the jungle, Victor has never seen anything like the white, ghostly images, so his traveling companion puts the film against the window, exposing his very insides to the lonely boy.

"These are my lungs," he said and clapped his chest. "My puny weak lungs."

There were tiny holes in the tissue, like scattered coins.

"Diseased lungs," the man whispered. He said he'd had medals, but he sold them when the war ended, to pay for his medicines.

"My father died in the war," Victor said, a fact that he thought might be true - lost and dead being cousins.

Alarcón, named recently by Granta magazine as a top young novelist, is a visiting writer at Mills College in Oakland, Calif. While he lives in a zeitgeist that fetishizes closure, for thousands in the ruins of war-ravaged places, that concept doesn't exist. The same can be said for his characters.

The author never names the country, and it's a canny choice, allowing us to imagine it as nowhere and everywhere at once - Beirut or Chechnya or Iraq. Unencumbered by the politics of any one nation, the chilling acts of violence committed by both guerilla and state forces are seen for what they are - morally indefensible, committed for uncertain gain. Wars only end, Alarcón writes, when one side runs out of men willing to die.

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